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ABSTRACT

Vocational education has suffered enrollment problems simply because there are fewer students today than a few years ago. Other factors that have hurt vocational enrollments include recent efforts to increase the number of academic credits required for graduation, and in the case of area vocational-technical schools, negative attitudes toward vocational education on the part of sending school personnel. As a result, vocational educators must either reassess their existing marketing and recruitment strategies or develop such programs. Educational marketing and recruitment campaigns must not, however, be developed without a strong concern for the ethicality of all strategies used. Perhaps the easiest way to define ethical recruitment is to begin by examining what is unethical. Some college tactics that either approach or go beyond ethical bounds include gimmickry, deception, payment for enrollees, no-need scholarships, early deadlines, and overadmission. The key to successful recruiting is to strike a balance between vocational education's special service orientation and the need to address the problem of declining enrollments in an effective manner. Based on recruitment strategies found in Pennsylvania and Florida vocational education programs, the following principles of sound marketing are recommended: (1) research the market; (2) be visible; (3) be thorough; (4) be aggressive; (5) meet the competition head on; and (6) practice the fundamentals of good marketing. (KC)

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EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL RECRUITMENT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

OVERVIEW

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OVERVIEW

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL RECRUITMENT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

Like academic education, vocational education has suffered enrollment problems simply because there are fewer students today than a few years ago. Other factors that have hurt vocational enrollments include recent efforts to increase the number of academic credits required for graduation and, in the case of area vocational-technical schools, negative attitudes toward vocational education on the part of sending school personnel. As a result, vocational educators must either reassess their existing marketing and recruitment strategies or develop such programs.

The benefits of a well-conceived recruitment program—both inside and outside the education sector—have been well documented. Educational marketing and recruitment campaigns must not, however, be developed without a strong concern for the ethicality of all strategies used. This Overview will describe the role of recruitment as a tool for increasing vocational educational enrollments, will discuss the need for ethical recruitment practices, and will outline effective strategies for recruiting vocational students.

Why Recruit?

Besides the problems of declining enrollments and increasing credit requirements, a combination of other forces is placing additional strains on the ability of vocational education to attract students. A study of administrators and counselors from area vocational-technical schools (AVTS) throughout Pennsylvania indicated that the following are the major difficulties in recruiting students: sending school "protectionism" due to declining enrollment, sending school counselors, negative reactions to and lack of knowledge about vocational education by sending school personnel, sending school personnel's practice of discouraging "better" students from attending AVTS, sending school budgets and AVTS per-pupil costs, the inability to reach all potential students, and parents' preconceived ideas of vocational education (O'Neill 1985, pp. 38-40). Thus, even if vocational educators do not desire to undertake an aggressive, offensive marketing and recruitment campaign, circumstances are forcing them to devise ways of marketing their programs—if only to defend themselves against misinformation and attempts to keep potentially willing enrollees from entering a vocational program.

Vocational education's special concern for training students to acquire and maintain employment also makes it particularly important to improve marketing and recruitment strategies geared toward overcoming the enrollment barriers unique to disadvantaged, unemployed, underemployed, and out-of-school youth. Waltz and Beeman (1985) have examined these barriers and identified recruitment practices that have been successful in overcoming them.

What Is Ethical Recruitment?

Perhaps the easiest way to define ethical recruitment is to begin by examining what is unethical. Fiske (1981) cites some college recruitment tactics that either approach or go beyond the bounds of what may be considered ethical marketing practices. His examples illustrate the following abuses: gimmickry, deception, payment for enrollees, no-need scholarships, early deadlines, and overadmission.

Although the latter four practices are not directly applicable to secondary vocational programs, they could pose ethical dilemmas in the development of recruitment programs at community and 2-year colleges and thus bear brief explanation. Opponents of no-need scholarships point out that colleges can use them to "buy" good students and that, although the practice may make sense in the short run, its long-term effect is simply to raise costs throughout the entire system. The problem with early deadlines is that they may force students to commit themselves to a certain school before they can fully evaluate all their options. "Payment for enrollees" refers to paying staff or representatives on the basis of the students they recruit. This does not mean, however, that schools should not actively encourage their staff to develop marketing skills and to provide training to foster such development. In fact, in an article on avoiding and stemming abuses in academic marketing, Litten (1981) advocates recognizing and rewarding marketing strategies that "protect long-term individual and social interests in the face of pressures to serve short-term interests" (p. 113).

Litten also stresses that the service nature of education introduces many marketing peculiarities to which business and government ventures are not subject, including the direct involvement of "all components of the administration/faculty/student mix which constitute the educational resources" of the school (p. 111).

The idea that vocational education has special ethical responsibilities to those it serves is not new. In 1909, Parsons, who is referred to as the "father of guidance," stressed that no one should choose a vocation without careful self-analysis and thorough and honest guidance with respect to available occupations and the conditions of becoming successful in them (O'Neill 1985). The key, then, is to strike a balance between vocational education's special service orientation and the need to address the problem of declining enrollments in an effective, businesslike manner.

Can Recruitment Be Both Effective and Ethical?

O'Neill concludes that the recruitment and selection of students for AVTS must be developed in full consideration of "declining enrollments, increasing student costs, student readiness for career decision making, attitudes toward vocational education, and the lack of criteria for predicting student success in vocational programs" (1985, p. 60). This combination of a concern for sound marketing techniques and student welfare is reflected in O'Neill's recommendations to AVTS personnel. On the one hand, he encourages AVTS instructors and counselors to work actively to overcome sending school protectionism resulting from declining enrollments. On the other hand, he expresses concern that students be provided with accurate occupational information and that those persons providing students with occupational information and career counseling make an allowance for the fact that junior high school students may not be completely ready to make occupational and curricular decisions.

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What Are Ethical and Effective Strategies?

The literature contains extensive evidence that marketing and recruitment strategies can be both effective and ethical. The Pennsylvania and Florida vocational programs examined by O'Neill (1985) and Waltz and Beeman (1985) attack the problem of improving recruitment strategies from the perspective of improving the product being marketed. On the basis of the recruitment strategies found to be successful in these programs, persons developing recruitment programs should consider the following principles of sound marketing while not forgetting vocational education's fundamental responsibility to its students:

- **Research the Market**—In both Pennsylvania and Florida efforts were made to identify the specific needs and interests of the local student population. These were weighted against labor market research to ensure that the product being marketed (vocational courses) was indeed of value in the local job market or would be (through job development activities) and that customers (students) would have an accurate idea of what they were buying.
- **Be Visible**—In both states, vocational programs were given a high profile and the hands-on nature of vocational education was highlighted through visits to the vocational schools, demonstrations at sending schools, and publicity materials. Efforts were made to make presentations optimistic but at the same time objective.
- **Be Thorough**—Marketing efforts were not limited to potential students but were instead designed to reach parents, peers, sending school personnel (in the form of workshops on vocational education), and the community at large. This broad-spectrum approach is not only justified by research confirming the importance of parents and peers in students' enrollment decisions, but also has the long-term benefit of enhancing vocational education's image overall.
- **Be Aggressive**—In Florida particularly, a wide range of media was used to present vocational education in its most positive light, and ancillary services were developed to overcome customers' (potential students') reluctance "to buy" (i.e., barriers preventing potential students from enrolling). In all cases, however, attempts were made to obtain the most accurate information, and no false claims were made.
- **Meet the Competition Head On**—The emphasis in Pennsylvania on improving working relationships between AVTS and sending school personnel through coordination is a positive step toward reducing negative attitudes toward vocational education on the part of sending school staff.
- **Practice the Fundamentals of Good Marketing**—The efforts made in both states to train vocational educators in the use of marketing and recruitment strategies and in evaluating their effectiveness and appropriateness are crucial to the ability to convey the benefits of vocational education to a wider audience and thus boost enrollments.

Waltz et al. (1984) have published a recruitment package for postsecondary vocational education that could also serve as a source of ideas for secondary school staff responsible for developing marketing and recruitment materials and campaigns. The package includes activities and sample materials designed to train vocational educators to write promotional campaigns or programs, brochures and fliers, radio and television spots, and press releases; to design and implement recruitment activities; to develop and provide supportive services such as counseling; and to evaluate recruitment strategies and materials.

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